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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the degree of superintendent turnover in Nebraska, a state dominated by rural school districts. It also lists the causes of turnover as reported by short-term superintendents. This study finds that turnover is higher in the subject rural districts than the national average. Superintendents report that they leave these rural positions for personal family reasons, because of the particular nature of the rural position, because of conflict with rural boards of education, and for career advancement. While the study did not empirically compare its rural districts and superintendents with other districts and superintendents, there is reason to expect unique differences in rural areas. This paper calls for more information about superintendent turnover and its causes. (Author/TES)

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SUPERINTENDENT TURNOVER IN RURAL SCHOOL DISTRICTS

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the degree of superintendent turnover in a state dominated by rural school districts and lists the causes of turnover as reported by short-term superintendents.

Turnover is found to be higher than the national average in the rural districts of this study. Superintendents report that they leave these rural positions for personal family reasons, because of the particular nature of the rural superintendency, because of conflict with rural boards of education, and for reasons of career ascendency.

The investigators note that there is a shortage of information about superintendent turnover.

Introduction

The importance of school district stability has been downplayed by the educational reform movement. Various external mandates to improve education have been imposed upon the school district regardless of their potential for dysfunctional consequences. For example, states have required competency testing of teachers even though the primary effect of such policies may be to erect yet another bureaucratic hurdle over which the competent must vault. The focus of the reform has been on excoriating the negative, not in protecting the positive. Thus, an approach that would carefully guard school factors that are positive has been judged less important than an approach which would foster change.

The extent of the state and national effort to initiate change in the schools may damage school district effectiveness in unexpected ways. Establishing a causal link between the acts of the reform movement and subsequent school characteristics is difficult. However, it is plausible to expect some consequences. An increase in external demands on the public schools may contribute to an organizational instability that is reflected in higher rates of personnel turnover. When teachers,

administrators, and board members enter and depart quickly as through a revolving door, the educational program is diminished. Consistency and continuity are threatened; the image participants have of their school is tarnished; good teachers and administrators (those who are desired elsewhere) are lost; poor teachers and administrators (those who are not desired elsewhere) are retained.

Superintendents are critical players in the creation of orderly change and school district stability. When there is a rapid turnover of the superintendent, there will be difficulty in establishing consistent policy and administrative rule. In turn this will have a negative impact throughout the organization as participants face a persistent internal uncertainty which detracts from their work. Goals are likely to become ambiguous, employees are likely to divert their loyalty from organizational goals, and a crisis-oriented management style will dominate. In the typical school district, the superintendent is a critical force in developing and institutionalizing operational policy.

Cunningham and Hentges (1983) note that the average superintendent stays in his/her position for about 5.9 years (down from 6.0-6.5 in 1972). A more recent national study reports an average stay in present office of 6.7 years

(Feistritzer, 1988). Since these are average data, it can be assumed that there are districts where the superintendent turnover is higher. For example, turnover may be an acute problem in districts where there are chronic financial or board difficulties, poor socio-economic conditions, militancy on the part of teacher organizations, isolation in rural areas, or some combination of these characteristics. Surprisingly, there are little data capturing turnover other than the occasional report by the American Association of School Administrators (AASA).

It is not known if, in the near future, there will be an unusual shortage of school administrators due to retirement. There is a perception in some states that this will happen. If this shortage occurs, it is likely that its intensity will vary according to district type. It will be important to know more about the causes that deplete the pool of administrators. Personnel shortages result when employees change positions within the same profession, change professions, retire, or die. There is little research on the incidence or causes of superintendent turnover.

Using past research, one can begin to identify some of the elements that appear to increase or constrict turnover. For example, Buchholz (1969) found no difference in the effectiveness of outsider versus insider succession. Both seemed to fare equally well. Rather than accentuating

district differences, Buchholz sought similar districts for his study. In so doing, his study missed some important characteristics of the superintendency such as the effect of district size on superintendent turnover. Thus, it is possible that there may be a difference in the success of insider or outsider superintendents depending upon the district type.

Cunningham and Hentges (1983) noted that in larger school districts of 25,000 or more pupils, approximately 55.4% of the superintendents hired were outsiders (Carlson, 1962). In school districts of less than 300 pupils, the percentage of outsiders climbed to 70.9%. One consequence of this preponderance of outsiders in smaller school districts was suggested by Fenske (1970) who found that in high prestige districts, the style of superintendent leadership could be characterized as having a cosmopolitan/outsider orientation with a crusading style. Fenske did not find this same style to be common in low prestige districts. Fenske thus implies that the match between district and superintendent is more purposeful in high prestige districts.

Given this reasoning, it is logical to expect that in low prestige districts turnover will be above the national average reported by Cunningham and Hentges of 5.9%.

The Study

The investigators were particularly interested in the extent of superintendent turnover in rural states as well as in some of the causes underlying turnover. Nebraska presented the researchers with a suitable educational environment for the investigation. The state has a population of 327 K-12 school districts. There has been a history of concern over superintendent impermanence. Goddard (1977) reviewed these concerns about the high rate of turnover in Nebraska and noted that in the mid seventies, the average tenure of Nebraska superintendents was less than five years.

Two objectives guided this study:

1) the identification of the turnover in a state with many rural school districts;
2) the identification of reasons causing superintendent turnover in smaller school districts.

Using annual lists of school district superintendent personnel in Nebraska's K-12 school districts, the movement of superintendents in and out of their positions was charted. This was done for a period of seven years. In this fashion data were gathered on superintendent turnover.

Using this same information, individual superintendents

who served for short terms were identified. A telephone interview guide was developed. This guide was reviewed by seven experts in educational administration. Revisions were made as a consequence of this review. The interview guide was then used in gathering information from superintendents about the causes of their departure from office.

Using the annual lists, 21 superintendents who held their position for only one year were identified. A similar group of 42 who held their position for only two years was also identified. The investigators were able to locate 10 superintendents who had held their position for one year and 15 of those who had held their position for two years.

The interview guide was then administered to 25 individuals in a telephone interview. This phase of the study was conducted during the summer of 1987. The resulting data on the causes of turnover were aggregated. An additional personal interview with one of the subjects was conducted in order to review and explicate the information collected in the telephone interviews.

Findings on Superintendent Turnover

During the seven-year period covered by the study, there were 268 superintendent turnovers in the 327 K-12 school districts included in this study. Table One presents time-series data on superintendent vacancies. A surprising number of turnovers occurred during the seven-year period.

TABLE ONE ABOUT HERE

Table One shows a consistently high turnover during the seven years of 10% to 14%, a number substantially above that calculated by Cunningham and Hentges (1983). Small rural districts had greater difficulty retaining superintendents than the average school district nationwide.

In the population of 327 districts, 134 (41%) had no turnover in the seven-year period. In 131 (40%) districts there was one turnover during the seven-year period. In 49 (15%) districts there were two turnovers during the seven-year period. In 13 (4%) districts there were three turnovers during the period of the study. The schools with two or more turnovers create the higher percentages reported in Table One. Accordingly, it is in these districts that one may expect to find characteristics associated with rapid superintendent turnover. As noted earlier, the subjects interviewed were drawn from the districts with multiple turnovers.

Findings on Causes Related to Turnover

The average population in districts with multiple turnovers was approximately 600 residents. Most districts were in agricultural communities located over 30 miles from any population center. Sources queried about these communities referred to them as dying towns characterized by a loss of business vitality and a steady outmigration of inhabitants. These root causes of decline were manifested at the school district level in a number of ways.

Goddard (1970) offered a rudimentary analysis of the higher rate of superintendent turnover in rural districts. Administrative turnover may be caused by such factors as financial problems, the large number of administrative units, the upward mobility of superintendents, the instability of the position, or the inadequacy of the people who comprise the boards of education in small rural districts (Goddard, 1970:7-8). Goddard's analysis was used to build a taxomony for organizing subject responses.

The identified causes of departure were grouped into four categories:

1) Personal Reasons
2) Job or District Characteristics
3) Problems with Board of Education
4) Career Ascendency

Personal reasons were cited by 10 of the 24 subjects as the primary cause of their leaving. Four superintendents sought to move closer to their home or "roots" and had achieved a career level that allowed them to do so. Stress on family, educational needs of children, and marriage were mentioned. One subject who had been a short-term superintendent in a small, rural school summed up his reasons for leaving by saying: "We travelled to buy groceries; we travelled to go to the doctor; we travelled for entertainment; we travelled to go to church; and we travelled to do everything."

Eight former superintendents cited job or district conditions as the primary cause of their departure. Mentioned in this category were such factors as declining enrollment, poor district financial health, and administrative interference by board members. Several of these superintendents were ousted by the return of the "native son"--local individuals who wanted their jobs back. In one of these situations, board members sought to give a job to a qualified local whose farm was failing. Generally, the short-term superintendent in this group complained frequently about the power exerted by individual community members. A poor coaching record, the disciplining of the wrong student, the unhappy parent with influential relatives

all were examples used to illustrate the power of individual community members.

Five of the subjects directly attributed their departure to problems with board relations. All five depicted board member confusion over board role and their eventual inability to cope with that confusion. The superintendent was expected to be the board "puppet" or "scapegoat." Boards would instruct superintendents to fire a teacher or undertake some similar action that the superintendent could not perform professionally or ethically.

Finally, four participants in the study indicated their move to be simply a move up. Shiroda (1973) labeled this movement career ascendency. One superintendent noted that the new job provided a salary increase of $6,000. Another indicated that he had been recruited. Another had only planned to stay at the vacated superintendency until experience and visibility had been attained and then move to a better job. All saw their move as a departure from a low prestige district to one with higher prestige.

Discussion and Implications

Turnover appears to be a constant feature of the Nebraska school landscape and it may be a phenomenon on the increase. During 1987/88, Nebraska's schools experienced 50

superintendent turnovers, a percentage of about 15%. Sixty-six percent of those leaving one superintendency left to assume similar positions in Nebraska or other states. Eighteen percent retired. Two percent died and it was unknown what happened to the remaining 14%. These turnovers continued to be concentrated in small, rural, isolated schools in dying communities.

American society grows more stratified and economically segregated (Martin, 1988). School districts are not outside these societal changes. Thus, in terms of wealth and stability, some school districts fare better than others. Policy makers need to face this reality and begin to redress the unequal distribution of resources that is manifested in differential turnover rates of superintendents.

More information is needed about superintendent turnover and its causes. When top school management changes, the ability of school leaders to provide a nurturing environment for educational programs is compromised. This is not to say that management should not change. However, some degree of organizational stability is necessary for schools to function. High superintendent turnover is a symptom that the local school organization lacks direction and future orientation.

This study explored turnover and its implications only

in a rural context. While the investigators did not empirically contrast the rural districts and superintendents of this study with other districts and superintendents, there is reason to expect unique differences in rural areas. Too often, state and national policy studies are directed at schools regardless of local environmental and organizational conditions. Such approachs miss critical distinctions.

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TABLE ONE

Superintendent Vacancies by Year

Year	Vacancies	Districts	Percentage
1979/80	44	327	13%
1980/81	42	327	13%
1981/82	33	327	10%
1982/83	33	327	10%
1983/84	38	327	12%
1984/85	45	327	14%
1985/86	33	327	10%

Total District Turnover Over Seven Years = 268
Annual Average Over Seven-Year Period = 12%
Source: Statistics and Facts About
Nebraska Schools: 1979/80-1985/86

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OUTLINE OF ROUNDTABLE PRESENTATION

FIRST WE WERE INTERESTED IN THE CHARACTERISTICS OF SUPERINTENDENTS THAT LEFT JOBS ROUTINELY. WERE THEY FIRED? DID THEY LACK TRAINING? WERE THEY MISMATCHED IN SOME FUNDAMENTAL WAY? WHY DID THEY REPEATEDLY LEAVE JOBS?

THAT LED US TO THE QUESTION: WHAT ARE THE CHARACTERISTICS OF RURAL COMMUNITIES THAT HAVE HIGH SUPERINTENDENT TURNOVER? THAT IS FOCUSING QUESTION OF OUR PRESENT RESEARCH.

WE HAVE IDENTIFIED A NUMBER OF SMALL COMMUNITIES IN NEBRASKA WHERE THERE IS HIGH TURNOVER OF SUPERINTENDENTS. WE ARE PRESENTLY ATTEMPTING TO DESCRIBE THE SALIENT FEATURES OF A NUMBER OF THOSE COMMUNITIES AS THEY APPEAR TO HAVE SOME CAUSAL ROLE IN WHAT WE CALL SCHOOL DISTRICT INSTABILITY.

THAT TERM INSTABILITY LEADS US TO THE TOPIC OF OUR ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION: EVOLUTIONARY CYCLES, ECOLOGICAL METAPHORS, AND RURAL SCHOOL STABILITY.

WE ARGUE THAT WE NEED TO BE ABLE TO DESCRIBE RURAL SCHOOL COMMUNITIES BOTH IN AN EVOLUTIONARY TIME FRAME AND IN AS OCCUPYING ECOLOGICAL SPACE.

LET ME ILLUSTRATE. ONE OF THE TOWNS THAT WE HAVE SPENT SOME TIME STUDYING IN RECENT MONTHS USED TO BE A VERY PROSPEROUS SMALL TOWN WITH A POPULATION OF OVER 1,000 INHABITANTS, A THRIVING BUSINESS SECTION WITH ABOUT THIRTY BUSINESSES, ITS OWN HIGH SCHOOL, A WEEKLY NEWSPAPER OF ABOUT 8-10 PAGES. NOW IT IS A TOWN OF 200, STILL HAS A HIGH SCHOOL, HAS A GAS STATION, A BAR, A SENIOR CITIZEN CENTER, AND A SELDOM USED TOWN HALL. PEOPLE SHOP AND WORK IN A MAJOR CITY ABOUT 25 MILES AWAY. ABOUT HALF OF THE PEOPLE LIVE IN THE TWON BECAUSE THE RENTS ARE CHEAP. THE REST HAVE BEEN THERE FOR SOME TIME AND TEND TO BE THE AGING COHORT.

THIS IS THE ENVIRONMENTAL SENSE. OVER TIME, SOMETHING HAS HAPPENED. USING CADA, ET AL. THIS TOWN IS AT THE BREAKDOWN STAGE IN ITS EVOLUTION. IT WILL PROBABLY NOT BECOME EXTINCT ALTHOUGH THAT IS A POSSIBILITY. IF IT SURVIVES, IT WILL NOT DO SO BECAUSE IT PROVIDES A TERRAIN IN WHICH SOCIAL AND CULTURAL INTERACTIONS ARE DOMINANT AS THE GLUE. RATHER THREE POSSIBLE SCENARIOS MAY MAKE IT POSSIBLE FOR IT TO

SURVIVE:

1) IT WILL BEHAVE AS AN ECOLOGICAL SPECIALIST AND CARVE A NICHE OUT FOR ITSELF SERVING THE SENIOR CITIZEN POPULATION. IT IS KNOWN AS A PLACE WITH A LARGE POPULATION OF SENIORS WHO FIND IT POSSIBLE TO LIVE THERE. THIS MIGHT HAPPEN BECAUSE OF STATE POLICY THAT HELPS THE TOWN DEVELOP IN THIS WAY. MORE LIKELY IS THAT IT WILL JUST HAPPEN OVER TIME.

2) BECAUSE IT IS NEAR A MAJOR CITY. IT MAY BE A MATTER OF TIME BEFORE THE CHEAPNESS OF LAND AND HOUSING MAKES IT ONCE MORE AN ATTRACTIVE PLACE TO SETTLE. PRESENTLY IT ATTRACTS A LOW INCOME RENTAL POPULATION. THAT MAY GRADUALLY CHANGE.

3) THE TOWN MIGHT ATTRACT SOME SMALL INDUSTRIAL OR ENTREPENEURIAL OPERATION THAT WOULD KEEP ITS CORE GOING. THE POSSIBILITY FOR THAT EXISTS PRESENTLY IN THE FORM OF A CAMPGROUND THAT A NEW COMER HAS DEVELOPED FOR MOTORCYCLE CLUBBERS.

CONCERNING ECOLOGICAL METAPHORS. A BIT OF EXPLANATION IS IN ORDER. WE ARE USING THAT TERM BROADLY. WE ARE INTERESTED IN WHAT HAS HAPPENED TO THE RELATIONSHIPS OF TOWNS AS THEY CONCECT WITH OTHER TOWNS AND WE ARE INTERESTED IN THE SOCIAL UNITS WITHIN THE TOWN AND HOW THEY CONNECT WITH EACH OTHER. FOR EXAMPLE. THE LITERATURE ON SMALL TOWNS WILL TELL US THAT RURAL TOWNS USED TO BE FORMED AS CUMMULATIVE TOWNS (PAIGE SMITH). IN SUCH TOWNS THERE IS A WHOLE ELABORATE SOCIAL STRUCTURE THAT IS SET UP TO CREATE ORDER--A PECKING ORDER (NORMALLY DEFINED BY BUSINESS ACUMEN AND WORK HABITS), A HIERARCHY OF HAVES AND HAVENOTS (OR ANCIENTS AND NEWCOMERS), A MORAL ORDER THAT SERVES AS A SCREEN IN DETERMINING WHO IS ANNOINTED AND WHO IS BRANDED AS AN AGINER. THESE STRUCTURES ARE PART OF THE ECOLOGY OF THE TOWN WE WOULD ARGUE.

ALL OF THIS RELATES TO SCHOOLS IN THE FOLLOWING WAY: WE WOULD SPECULATE THAT SCHOOLS WILL MIRROR THE FOLKWAYS OF THE TOWN. IF THE TOWN IS DYING. WE WORRY THAT THE SCHOOL MIGHT ALSO BE DYING. IS IT GOOD FOR STUDENTS TO BE IN SUCH AN ENVIRONMENT? BUT THE WORLD IS NOT QUITE THAT SIMPLE. STABILITY IS NOT NECESSARILY FOUND ONLY IN TOWNS ON THE DECLINE. SOMETIMES IT IS FOUND IN TOWNS THAT FROM AN ECONOMIC SENSE ARE STABLE. WHAT DO WE SEE IN THE SCHOOLS IN SUCH TOWNS? HOW DO THEY REINFORCE THE SOCIAL COMMUNITY STRUCTURE?

WE WILL CONTEND THAT RURAL SCHOOLS ARE AN UNTAPPED RESOURCE

RELATIVE TO FINDING A BETTER UNDERSTANDING OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN EDUCATION AND THE COMMUNITY.